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AUTHOR Townsend, Kathleen Kennedy
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ABSTRACT

This speech promotes student involvement in community service activities. The notions of traditional American volunteerism and community spirit support the idea of students devoting their afterschool talents and energy to helpful endeavors such as tutoring, visiting nursing homes, planting trees, cleaning up ocean shores and river banks, clearing stream beds, getting involved in political campaigns, and organizing blood drives. Both the obstacles and rewards resulting from voluntary community service are discussed. (JAM)

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A REBIRTH OF COURAGE:
SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY

Kathleen Kennedy Townsend

Speech given before the National Community Education Association's "Families at Risk Institute" in Orlando, Florida, November 28-December 1, 1988.

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A REBIRTH OF COURAGE:

SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY

IT IS A JOY TO STAND HERE WITH EACH OF YOU TODAY. I WANT TO ESPECIALLY CONGRATULATE DARLA STROUSE WHO'S TIRELESS EFFORTS HAVE BROUGHT US ALL TOGETHER.

I ALSO WANT TO THANK DAVID HORNBECK. HE HAS BEEN THE LEADER OF COMMUNITY SERVICE. HIS VISION, HIS PERSISTENCE, AND HIS COURAGE ARE AN INSPIRATION TO MANY. AND I AM NOT JUST REFERRING TO THE FACT THAT HE HIRED ME. WE IN MARYLAND WILL MISS HIM A GREAT DEAL.

IN THE LAST YEAR AN INCREASING NUMBER OF STUDENTS ARE COMMITTING THEMSELVES TO COMMUNITY SERVICE. AT FRIENDS AND SOUTHERN HERE IN BALTIMORE CITY, AT SUITLAND HIGH SCHOOL IN PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY, AT FALLSTON AND HARVE DE GRAACE IN HARFORD COUNTY AND IN MANY OTHER HIGH SCHOOLS ALL ACROSS THE STATE, STUDENTS ARE DEVOTING THEIR TALENTS AND ENERGY TO TUTORING, TO VISITING NURSING HOMES AND SENIOR CENTERS, TO PLANTING TREES, AND CLEARING STREAM BEDS, TO GETTING INVOLVED IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS AND ORGANIZING BLOOD DRIVES.

I BELIEVE IN SERVICE BECAUSE IT HAS BEEN SO MUCH A PART OF MY OWN EXPERIENCE. WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, VOLUNTEERING WAS AS NATURAL AS GOING TO CHURCH, SCHOOL, OR I MUST ADMIT, POLITICAL RALLIES. SOMETIMES I WONDER IF I CAN EVEN CALL IT "VOLUNTEERING" IT WAS SO MUCH THE EXPECTED ORDER OF THE DAY. I CONSTANTLY HEARD ST. LUKE'S ADMONITION THAT FROM THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN GIVEN MUCH, MUCH WILL BE EXPECTED. AND SO I WORKED WITH MENTALLY RETARDED,

VISITED SENIOR CENTERS, AND RAISED MONEY FOR THE MISSIONARIES IN CHOL-CHOL CHILE.

SOME OF THE EXPERIENCES DIDN'T TURN OUT EXACTLY AS THEY WERE PLANNED. AND OFTEN WHAT WAS RECEIVED WAS AS VALUABLE AS WHAT IS GIVEN.

I REMEMBER WHEN I WAS 12 YEARS OLD GOING WITH A FRIEND AND HER MOTHER TO DELIVER A CHRISTMAS DINNER. WE WALKED UP THREE FLIGHTS OF NARROW, POORLY LIT STAIRS IN A WASHINGTON TENEMENT TO HELP DELIVER THE TURKEY, STUFFING, VEGETABLES, AND A BAG OF TOYS. AFTER A LITTLE BOY GREETED US AT THE DOOR HIS MOTHER QUICKLY CAME, THANKED US, TOOK THE PACKAGES AND THEN WE LEFT. THE ENTIRE EXCHANGE TOOK LESS THAN FIVE MINUTES. I STILL RECALL THE VAGUELY EMBARRASSSED FEELING I HAD AS I DESCENDED THE STAIRS. WERE THEY RESENTFUL OF OUR GOOD FORTUNE. HAD WE MADE THE MOTHER FEEL INADEQUATE BECAUSE SHE HAD NOT PROVIDED FOR HER CHILDREN? WERE OUR MOTIVES FOR VOLUNTEERING PURE, OR WERE WE JUST TRYING TO SOOTHE OUR GUILTY CONSCIENCES? GOOD QUESTIONS, BUT ONES THAT COULD ALSO EASILY BE ENLISTED TO RATIONALIZE NOT MAKING FURTHER TRIPS INTO THE GHETTO. WHILE IT IS EASY TO DISMISS THE TIP AS JUST ANOTHER MANIFESTATION OF "LADY BOUNTIFUL", I BELIEVE IT HAD GOOD RESULT. THE FAMILY HAD A REAL CHRISTMAS DINNER.

BUT PERHAPS, MORE IMPORTANT, MY FRIEND AND I LEARNED SOMETHING ABOUT OUR COUNTRY AND OURSELVES. THIS AND OTHER VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCES TAUGHT US TO THINK ABOUT WHAT WE BELIEVED IN, WHAT WE THOUGHT IMPORTANT AND WORTHWHILE. IT STRENGTHENED OUR DETERMINATION TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR LIVES AND THE LIVES OF OTHERS.

NOW, MANY YEARS LATER, WE STILL ASK QUESTIONS. BUT NOT AS MANY. WE BECOME MORE CONCERNED WITH RAISING OUR FAMILY, CARING FOR OUR PARENTS, AND OUR WORK. WE, THE OLDER GENERATION, HAS LESS ENERGY AND TIME TO DEVOTE TO CREATING CHANGE.

THAT IS WHY THE YOUNG ARE SO IMPORTANT. FOR THE YOUNG BRING A NEW SPIRIT TO OLD ISSUES. THEY ARE WILLING TO TAKE RISKS, AND ACT BOLDLY. THEY ARE WILLING TO LOOK AT THE WORLD ANEW AND THEY HAVE THE ENERGY, THE TALENT AND THE WILL TO MAKE OUR COMMUNITIES A BETTER PLACE TO LIVE.

JUST AS THEN, WE ASK TODAY WHETHER SATISFACTION, PURPOSE AND DIGNITY ARE TO BE FOND SOLELY IN THE PURSUIT OF INDIVIDUAL AFFLUENCE AND SUCCESS. JUST AS THEM, WE SEEK THE PROPER BALANCE BETWEEN THE LIBERTY THAT THE CITIZEN MUST PRESERVE AGAINST THE STATE AND THE CONTRIBUTION WE SENSE EACH CITIZEN SHOULD MAKE TO THE COUNTRY. WE ASK OUR VERSION OF THE OLD TALMUDIC QUESTION: "IF I AM NOT NOR MYSELF, WHO WILL BE? YET IF I AM ONLY FOR MYSELF, WHAT AM I?" THOUSANDS OF MARYLANDERS SEE SUFFERING AND WANT AND WITH THEIR REMARKABLE AND UNIQUE GENEROSITY SEEK WAYS THROUGH SERVICE TO AMELIORATE OR END THAT MISERY.

WHAT ARE THE LESSONS OF SERVICE FOR TODAY?

WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN A NATION OF VOLUNTEERS. FROM THE VERY FIRST, AMERICANS WERE THOSE WHO CHOSE TO COME HERE. SCORNED AND PERSECUTED IN THEIR NATIVE LANDS THEY MAY HAVE BEEN. YET THEY WERE THE ONES WHO VOLUNTEERED THEMSELVES AND THEIR FAMILIES FOR THAT HAZARDOUS AND UNCERTAIN JOURNEY, AND FOR THE LIFE OF A NEW WORLD THAT LAY IN WAIT. AND AS THE NEW LAND WAS BUILT AND

SETTLED, ITS BOUNDARIES WERE PUSHED EVER FORWARD AND SETTLEMENT EXTENDED BY A CONSTANT STREAM OF VOLUNTEERS. NO LAW OR REGULATION COULD HAVE PRODUCED THE SCOUTS AND MOUNTAIN MEN WHO WENT IN ADVANCE, NOR THE MEN WHOSE AXES CLEARED THE FORESTS, NOR THE WOMEN WHO BRAVED INDIANS AND STARVATION, BEARS AND DROUGHT, HAIL AND THEIR HUSBANDS, TO BRING DECENCY AND CIVILIZATION TO THE RUDE FRONTIERS.

SO ALSO THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE NEW LAND WAS THE WORK OF VOLUNTEERS, SELF-APPOINTED LEADERS WHO PLEDGED THEIR LIVES AND FORTUNES TO PROPOSITONS THE SUCCESS OF WHICH WAS FAR LESS CERTAIN IN 1776 THAT HAS EVER SEEMED SINCE. AND IF THERE WAS ALWAYS ONE GREAT BLOT ON THIS VOLUNTARY SCHEME, IF THERE WERE FROM THE BEGINNING SLAVES WHO DID NOT ASK TO COME TO THESE SHORES, STILL IT IS TRUE THAT THE ABOLITIONISTS WHO BRAVED FIRE AND OBLOGUY TO GIVE FREEDOM TO THE SLAVES WERE EVERY ONE A VOLUNTEER OF LIBERTY.

DE TOCQUEVILLE FOUND THE CHARACTERISTIC AMERICAN INSTITUTION TO BE THE FREE VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION; DOWN TO THE SIMPLE CUSTOM OF RAISING THE ROOF OF A BARN, WHEN ALL ONE'S NEIGHBORS WOULD CONTRIBUTE THEIR LABOR FOR THE CRITICAL DAY. AND THROUGH THE 19TH CENTURY AS THE IMMIGRANTS CAME IN THEIR MILLIONS, EACH IN TURN FORMED ITS OWN GROUPS AND SOCIETIES TO ADVANCE THEIR FELLOWS AND THEIR NEW COUNTRY. THEY BUILT CHURCHES AND SYNAGOGUES, BEER HALLS AND GYMNASIUMS, COLLEGES AND ART MUSEUMS AND SYMPHONY ORCHESTRAS, SETTLEMENT HOUSE AND LABOR UNIONS, THEY BUILT, THAT IS, BY VOLUNTARY EFFORT, THE HEART AND SINEW OF AMERICAN CULTURE AND LIFE.

NOR WAS THIS VOLUNTARY LARGESS CONFINED TO THE UNITED STATES FROM THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY, CHURCH AND MISSIONARY SOCIETIES WORKED TO IMPROVE THE LOT OF THE NON-EUROPEAN WORLD. AS LATE AS 1940 A UNITED STATES SENATOR FROM NEBRASKA WOULD PLEDGE THAT "WITH GOD'S HELP, WE ARE GOING TO LIFT SHANGHAI UP, UP, EVER UP, UNTIL IT IS JUST LIKE KANSAS CITY." AMERICAN CHILDREN WHO DID NOT CLEAN THEIR PLATES WERE EXHORTED TO THING OF THE STARVING CHILDREN ABROAD; CHURCH COLLECTION BOXES WERE FILLED WITH OUTGROWN CLOTHING FOR THE POOR OF AFRICA; MANY STILL REMEMBER THE COLLECTIONS FOR EUROPEAN RELIEF AFTER WORLD WAR I, AND THE LOVINGLY PUT TOGETHER FOOD PARCELS--THE CARE PACKAGES--THAT FOLLOWED WORLD WAR II.

THERE WAS ALSO, OF COURSE, ALWAYS ANOTHER CURRENT. THIS WAS THE CURRENT OF INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY, INDIVIDUAL PROGRESS, INDIVIDUAL ACHIEVEMENT. THIS WAS THE EXTRAORDINARY OPENNESS OF AMERICAN LIFE AND OPPORTUNITY, THAT HAS BEEN PERHAPS OUR GREATEST CONTRIBUTION TO THE LIFE OF ALL MANKIND: THAT HAS INVITED THE TALENTED, THE HARD-WORKING, FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD, FROM EVERY CLIME AND SOCIAL CLASS, TO MAKE THEIR SUCCESSIVE AND CUMULATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE GENIUS OF AMERICA. THIS IS THE CURRENT THAT HAS CHAFED AT ALL RESTRAINTS OF CUSTOM, GOVERNMENT, TRADITION; THAT HAS SOUGHT CEASELESSLY TO SWEEP AWAY THE OLD AND ESTABLISHED, AS IT REVOLUTIONIZED SCIENCE AND BUSINESS, EDUCATION AND TRANSPORT, AGRICULTURE AND WAR, TOOLS OF HEALING AND INSTRUMENTS OF DEATH. IT HAS BEEN YOUR FAITH THAT THE FREE INDIVIDUAL, OPERATING OPEN MARKETS AND WITH CAREERS OPEN TO THE

TALENTS, WOULD BRING PROGRESS ON A SCALE AND QUALITY NEVER BEFORE KNOWN ON EARTH.

SO IT HAS PROVEN; AND NO SERIOUS PERSON WOULD THEREFORE PROPOSE TO CHANGE OR LIMIT THAT FREEDOM OF INDIVIDUAL LIFE AND EFFORT. IT IS IN ANY EVENT FIRMLY ENSHRINED IN THE CONSTITUTION ITSELF BUT THERE IS A DARKER SIDE TO THIS GLORY. INDIVIDUALISM UNCHECKED CAN SEEM SOMETIMES LIKE AN INFECTION RUN WILD. THE CAPTAIN OF COMMERCE IS A ROBBER BARON TO HIS COMPETITORS AND AN EXPLOITER TO HIS WORKERS. THE BUSINESS THAT FIVES LIFE TO A COMMUNITY IS LATER DISCOVERED TO HAVE POISONED IT WITH WASTES. THE LIBERTY OF EXPRESSION THAT SHELTERS THE ARTIST AND THE DISSENTER ALSO SHIELDS THE MOST VIRULENT PORNOGRAPHER.

AND DEEPER EVEN THAN THIS IS THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM, THE TENSION OF ANY COMMERCIAL SOCIETY. COMMERCE CREATES WEALTH, RAISES LIVING STANDARDS, SUPPORTS THE ADVANCE OF CIVILIZATION. YET FOR WHOLE PERIODS OF OUR HISTORY, COMMERCE HAS SEEMED TO IMMERSE THE WHOLE NATION IN GREED, RAPACIOUSNESS, DISHONESTY AND THE EXALTATION OF MONEY, AND THE DEATH OR BURIAL OF VIRTUE. I THE LAST ANALYSIS, ALL NATIONS DEPEND FOR THEIR SURVIVAL ON THE EXISTENCE OF VIRTUES THAT HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH MONEY. COURAGE, SELF-SACRIFICE, HONOR, DUTY, FORTITUDE, SIMPLICITY AND TRUTH: THESE ARE THE ESSENTIAL VIRTUES OF A REPUBLIC, AND NONE OF THEM CAN BE BOUGHT. WE ARE FAMILIAR WITH THE FACT THAT OUR WARS HAVE NEVER BEEN FOUGHT BY HIRED MERCENARIES. RATHER WE HAVE DEPENDED ON CITIZEN SOLDIERS, AS DID THE GREEKS AND ROME AS LONG AS IT WAS FREE.

BUT IT IS NOT ONLY IN WAR THAT SOCIETIES MUST TURN TO QUALITIES THAT ARE NOT FOND IN COMMERCE. SOCIETIES AT PEACE ALSO REQUIRE FIREMEN, POLICE, RESCUE WORKERS, TEACHERS FOR GHETTO SCHOOLS. BUT NO MAN GOES INTO A BURNING BUILDING FOR MERE MONEY. NOR DOES MONEY COMMONLY SEEM TO BUY DEDICATION IN A TEACHER, OR LOVE IN THE CARE GIVEN TO A DYING OLD MAN.

AND AS A FINAL COMPOUND OF THE PROBLEM, THE INELUCTABLE DIRECTION OF HISTORY IS FROM NAIVETE TO CYNICISM: INNOCENCE ONCE LOST IS NOT REGAINED, THE APPLE OF KNOWLEDGE TASTED IS NEVER RESTORED TO ITS PRISTINE STATE. SO ONCE A COUNTRY FINDS COMMERCE AND RICHES, STATES WHAT UNBOUND INDIVIDUAL ENERGIES AND TALENTS CAN CREATE FOR THEIR POSSESSORS--ONCE THIS HAPPENS, CAN COMMUNITY, FELLOW-FEELING, THE REPUBLICAN VIRTUES SURVIVE? HOW ARE THEY TO BE TAUGHT AND PASSED ON IN A SOCIETY DOMINATED BY MONEY?

WHO THEN WILL RAISE THE HEROES?

THAT IS THE QUESTION THE STUDENT SERVICE, OR YOUTH CORPS, SEEKS TO ANSWER. WHAT THE YOUTH CORPS REPRESENTS IS THE REGENERATION OF NAIVETE, SIMPLICITY, AND IDEALISM IN A MODERN WORLD. CENTRAL TO THE MEANING OF THE YOUTH CORPS IS THAT ITS YOUNG PEOPLE ARE NOT TECHNICAL EXPERTS. THEIRS INSTEAD ARE THE SKILLS AND THE COMMITMENTS OF CITIZENSHIP, AND WHAT THEY TEACH IS VIRTUE--THE VIRTUE OF COMMON EFFORT, OF CARING FOR EACH CITIZEN.

SERVICE, BY TEACHING THE YOUNG TO GIVE OF THEMSELVES, ENCOURAGES THEM TO REACH TO GREATER COMMUNITY BEYOND THEMSELVES.

BY ALERTING THEM TO PROBLEMS AND GIVING THEM THE OPPORTUNITY

TO SOLVE THE PROBLEMS, AND PROGRAM OF COMMUNITY SERVICE INSTILLS A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY AND PURPOSEFULNESS. BY DEMONSTRATING THAT GOALS CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED, IT CAN BUILD COURAGE IN THE YOUNG NEEDED TO TACKLE TOUGH ISSUES, AND "COURAGE" AS WINSTON CHURCHILL SAID, "IS THE MOST IMPORTANT VIRTUE, FOR IT IS THE ONE VIRTUE WHICH MAKES ALL OTHERS POSSIBLE."

THERE IS MUCH TO BE DONE. ILLITERACY IS A NATIONAL DISGRACE. IN MARYLAND THERE ARE AN 200,000 ILLITERATE ADULTS, AND THOUSANDS OF STUDENTS STILL IN SCHOOL ARE READING BELOW THEIR GRADE LEVEL. AN IMPORTANT PART OF A COMMUNITY SERVICE PROGRAM WILL BE IN WHICH YOUTH WILL SERVE THE YOUNG AND INSTILL THE LOVE OF READING.

PERHAPS THE GREATEST OF SOCIETY'S UN-MET NEEDS IS CARE FOR THE ELDERLY. THE ELDERLY ARE THE FASTEST-GROWING AGE GROUP IN OUR SOCIETY. IN 1930, THEY ACCOUNTED FOR 6 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION; TODAY THEY ARE 12 PERCENT. MOST DAUNTING OF ALL, THE FASTEST-GROWING PART OF THE ELDERLY POPULATION IS THOSE WHO ARE 85 AND OLDER--MOST OF WHOM NEED TO BE CARED FOR. ANOTHER PART OF A GOOD COMMUNITY SERVICE PROGRAM SHOULD BE YOUTH SERVING THE OLD.

THE CHESAPEAKE BAY NEEDS TO BE CLEANED. THE BANKS AND STREAMS ARE ERODING. YOUNG PEOPLE ARE READY PLANTING SEA GRASSES AND DOING STEAM TESTING. MORE COULD BE DONE. A FOCUSED PROGRAM OF COMMUNITY SERVICE CAN EXPAND THIS WORK MANYFOLD.

IN COMMUNITY SERVICE, AS EXPERIENCE AND AS METAPHOR, AMERICA CAN RE-DISCOVER THE INNOCENCE, THE SPRING OF IDEALISM THAT RUNS CLEAR AND FRESH THROUGH EVERY GENERATION, HOWEVER BURIED AT ANY MOMENT BY THE BULLDOZERS OF A SURGING ECONOMY. A YOUTH CORPS

REMINDS US THAT THE SPRING WAITS FOR AND WITHIN, EVERY GENERATION OF AMERICANS. MOST REMARKABLY OF ALL, PERHAPS, WHAT SERVICE TEACHES IS THAT WE CAN RECOVER IDEALISM WITHOUT LAPSING INTO ILLUSIONS.

THERE WILL BE OBSTACLES TO YOUTH SERVICE. THERE WILL BE A SENSE OF FUTILITY. A BELIEF THAT THE PROBLEMS ARE SO OVERWHELMING THAT NOTHING CAN BE DONE. THERE WILL BE A SENSE OF TIMIDITY. HOW CAN WE TRY SOMETHING NEW? WILL I HAVE THE MONEY? HOW CAN I FIND THE TIME? HOW CAN I FIT IT INTO THE CURRICULUM? THERE WILL BE APATHY AND INDIFFERENCE. WHY SHOULD I GET INVOLVED? WHY SHOULD MY SCHOOL GET INVOLVED? ISN'T TEACHING CHARACTER SOMETHING THAT SHOULD BE DONE BY FAMILIES AND CHURCHES? WHAT'S IT TO ME? HOW WILL IT ADVANCE MY CAREER?

YET IF WE ARE GOING TO BREAK AWAY FROM THE TIRED ANSWERS AND INEFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS TO DRUG ABUSE, TEENAGE PREGNANCY, CRIME AND THE BUDGET DEFICIT, WE WILL HAVE TO REINVIGORATE A SENSE OF CIVIC VIRTUE. COMMUNITY SERVICE SHOWS THAT WE DO HAVE THE COURAGE TO TACKLE THE MOST INTRACTABLE ISSUES AND SUCCEED.

MY FATHER ROBERT KENNEDY SAID IN SOUTH AFRICA, "MORAL COURAGE IS A RARER COMMODITY THAN BRAVERY IN BATTLE OR GREAT INTELLIGENCE. YET IT IS THE ONE ESSENTIAL, VITAL QUALITY FOR THOSE WHO SEEK TO CHANGE A WORLD WHICH YIELDS SO PAINFULLY TO CHANGE."

A PROGRAM OF SERVICE IN WHICH YOUNG PEOPLE WILL RESIST THE TEMPTATION OF SELF-CENTEREDNESS AND SELFISHNESS WILL HELP DEVELOP IN THE HABIT OF MORAL COURAGE.

AND MORE THAN ANY MISSILE, FAR MORE THAN A TRADE BALANCE OR BOOK OF ACCOUNT, IT IS THE SPIRIT OF SERVICE WHICH BREEDS COURAGE THAT TELLS US THAT OUR COUNTRY--AND OUR CHILDREN'S COUNTRY--HAS THE STRENGTH AND THE WILL TO SURVIVE.

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